

*Citation for published version:*

Maclean, M, Harvey, C & Chia, R 2012, 'Sensemaking, storytelling and the legitimization of elite business careers', *Human Relations*, vol. 65, no. 1, pp. 17-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711425616>

*DOI:*

[10.1177/0018726711425616](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711425616)

*Publication date:*

2012

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711425616)

## University of Bath

### Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

#### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

#### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# Sensemaking, Storytelling and the Legitimization of Elite Business Careers

**Mairi Maclean**

University of Exeter Business School, UK

**Charles Harvey**

Newcastle University Business School, UK

**Robert Chia**

Strathclyde Business School, UK

## **Corresponding author:**

Mairi Maclean, University of Exeter Business School, Streatham Court, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4PU, UK.

Email: k.m.maclean@exeter.ac.uk

## **Abstract**

This paper examines elite business careers through the dual lens of sensemaking and storytelling as recounted in life-history interviews with business leaders. It explores how they make sense of, narrativize and legitimate their experiences of building their careers within and beyond large organizations. The research contribution is twofold. First, we explicate the sensemaking processes embedded within the multifarious stories recorded in life-history interviews, identified as *locating*, *meaning-making* and *becoming*. Second, we contribute to the literature on legitimacy by examining how business leaders use their storytelling as a vehicle for self-legitimization, (re)framing their accounts of their own success and justifying their position to themselves and others. In a world where reputations are hard won but easily lost, business leaders must nurture a life-history narrative which is socially desirable if their careers are to remain on track. This may serve them well through the creative evolution of their organizational journeys.

**Keywords** business leaders, elite business careers, life histories, legitimacy, narrative, sensemaking, self-legitimization, storytelling

## **Introduction**

This paper explores elite business careers through the dual lens of sensemaking and storytelling. It examines how business leaders make sense of, narrativize and legitimate their experiences of building and managing their careers within and beyond large corporations. It

is based upon life-history interviews with members of the British business elite from different organizational backgrounds, who typically have had long, successful careers, reaching the top of major companies before establishing themselves as multipositional actors within the field of power (Bourdieu, 1996). The paper responds to the call for more research into sensemaking processes within narratives (Brown et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007), from the perspective of business leaders. It explores their storytelling as a means of sensemaking, and their sensemaking as legitimacy-seeking through the medium of life-history narratives. In this regard, it resonates with other papers in this Special Issue, in particular Whittle and Mueller (2012), who examine the discursive devices employed by UK bankers to construct moral stories in the wake of the financial crisis.

While the role of narratives and narrativization is generally recognized as crucial to a fuller understanding of organizational phenomena (Boje, 2001; 2008; Brown, 1994; 1998; 2006; Brown & Jones, 2000; Brown et al., 2008; Czarniawska, 1998; 2004; Gabriel, 1995; 2000, 2004; Rhodes & Brown, 2005), storytelling by elite actors remains under-explored in the organization studies literature. This may be due to the ‘voices of the field’ (Czarniawska, 1998: 47) belonging to successful people who are already heard seeming less relevant than others (Gabriel, 2000). That business leaders have at times authored their own self-enhancing accounts (Brown, 1997) may also have contributed to their stories being considered less valid (e.g. Edwardes, 1983; Iacocca, 1984). The present gap, however, is regrettable, because it is through stories and self-narratives that business leaders lay claim to legitimacy, which they need to function effectively within the field of power. At a time when elite actors are increasingly ‘under fire’, when awareness of social inequalities is heightened, self-legitimacy is keenly sought. We suggest that the ways in which business leaders ‘relate to and shape systems of meaning’, justifying their privileges and rewards, is a topic in need of further study (Creed et al., 2002: 475).

We examine the sensemaking processes at work in the repertoire of stories recounted by business elites in life-history interviews, exploring how they present themselves within their storytelling to legitimize their success. We pose two principal research questions. First, *what sensemaking processes are embedded within the stories told by elite business leaders to explore and make sense of the events and episodes which intersperse their organizational journeys?* It is increasingly recognized that personal stories open a privileged window on individual organizational experiences (Gabriel, 1995). Storytelling is one means through which we may come to know an individual, and through which an individual may acquire greater self-knowledge, self-narration affording access to a more ‘authentic’ inner self (Townley, 1995). Self-narration has the capacity to change self-perceptions, allowing individuals to customize and ‘try out’ social and professional identities (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006). However, the elements of the sensemaking processes which underlie the activity of self-narration remain relatively under-explored (Brown et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007). In helping to bridge this gap, we aim to make our first contribution to the literature. Second, *how do organizational elites present themselves as successful individuals in their stories, thereby claiming and maintaining self-legitimacy in a non-egalitarian world?* Business leaders are the purveyors of legitimizing narratives or ‘action scripts’ (Suchman, 1995: 574). Building on the notion of ‘legitimizing accounts’ by individual actors (Creed et al., 2002; Elsbach, 1994; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Suchman, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara, 2002), we explore how business leaders present themselves in life-history narratives, using their storytelling as a vehicle for self-legitimization, justifying their success to themselves and others in an inequitable world. In this, we make our second contribution to the literature.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section elaborates the relationships between storytelling, sensemaking and legitimization in the narratives constructed by

business leaders to explain their lifetime journeys. The following section is methodological, detailing our research process, sources and analytical methods. The fourth section presents our findings, drawing on the rich data contained in our life-history transcripts to explicate the sensemaking processes at work in the stories told – identified as *locating*, *meaning-making* and *becoming* – and the ways in which business leaders explain their success and stake claims to self-legitimacy, which we describe as *defying-the-odds*, *staying-the-course*, *succeeding through talent* and *giving back to society*. Finally, we discuss our findings, reflect on the implications for theory, and assess the limitations of the study and potentialities for future research.

### **Storytelling, sensemaking and legitimization**

Stories are generally structured in the form of a beginning, middle and end. To these fundamental, time-based features may be added others, including a plot, characters and surprise (Boje, 2008; Brown et al., 2008; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Following Gabriel (1995), stories, which ascribe meaning to commonplace experience, provide a vehicle through which individuals may constitute themselves as subjects, allowing their subjectivity and identity to be reaffirmed. Ricoeur (1984: 150) offers a comprehensive definition:

A story describes a sequence of actions or experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people... These people are presented either in situations that change or as reacting to such change. In turn, these changes reveal hidden aspects of the situation and the people involved, and engender a new predicament which calls for thought, action, or both. This response to the new situation leads the story towards its conclusion.

For present purposes, we follow Boje (2001, 2008) in differentiating between stories and narratives; the core life histories recounted by interviewees being enlivened by discrete stories which branch off from the main narrative, which the self creatively integrates into a unity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Stories are fundamental to sensemaking in organizations, since ‘most organizational realities are based on narration’ (Weick, 1995: 127). Organizations ‘run on fictions’ (Czarniawska, 1998: 10), organizing finding expression in company reports and policy statements, all discourse being narrative to varying degrees (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). Storytelling is a critical aspect of managerial behaviour, at the heart of organizational existence (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Business leaders need to provide convincing answers when asked: ‘What’s the story?’ (Weick et al., 2005: 413). For Weick (1995: 61), what sensemaking requires above all is a good story:

A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking.

Sensemaking is inextricably bound up with language and communication. The adept use of language is a powerful dynamic for actors in an increasingly ‘text laden’ organizational world (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005: 61). It is language which constructs and gives order to reality, which it (temporarily) stabilizes, as individuals seek provisional resting-points offering plausible accounts of equivocal situations (Alvesson, 2003; Czarniawska, 2004).

Sensemaking entails a crystallization of meaning which functions as an impetus to action (Sonenshein, 2007; Weick, 2009; Weick et al., 2005). This highlights the importance of narratives for sensemaking, and of sensemaking narratives as creating points of stability amidst the flux of organizational life. Stories are primary sensemaking devices within life-history narratives, helping individuals make sense of change: *locating* the self in time, space and context, *making meaning* from its interactions with a fluctuating reality, and incorporating change into a unified self in a continuous process of *becoming*. These processes are discussed in greater detail below.

*Locating, meaning-making and becoming*

Organizations are best understood as fluid, dynamic entities (Chia, 1995; Gioia et al., 2000; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Individuals themselves must likewise be understood as historical effects of social relations, the ‘condensation of histories of growth and maturation within fields of social relations’ (Ingold, 2000: 3), a product of experiences and ongoing sensemaking processes. As social beings, we are meaning-making ‘bundles’ of relationships and event-clusters, *making meaning* from our daily encounters, through which we come to espouse personal values and beliefs (Bruner, 1990). Each individual agency emerges and endures as a locus of meaning within the context of specific fields of social practices.

Viewing organizations and individuals in terms of process and becoming implies that some adaptability in life is unavoidable (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Individuals require perceptual ‘staging-posts’ to better understand transitions in the flow of everyday experience. Sensemaking helps individuals strike a balance between the extremes of an unabated flux that may overwhelm an identifiable sense of self, and an unmoderated stability threatening to stifle personal development. As sensemaking vehicles, stories may be memorable and immediate (Brown, 1998), creating powerful visual pictures in the mind of the listener. Those derived from life-history interviews connect the past to the present and beyond, occasioning ‘liminal conditions between current realities and future possibilities’ (Rhodes & Brown, 2005: 173). This enables a quasi-essentialist self to be maintained whilst allowing a more future-oriented, adaptable self to emerge; enabling coherence to be retained while facilitating reinvention (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Sensemaking has been compared by Weick (2009) to cartography, as individuals learn to draw their own maps from lived experience (Sonenshein, 2007). In the unmanaged spaces of contemporary organizations (Gabriel, 1995), De Certeau (1984) urges individuals to recapture space for creative subjectivity – to turn impersonal ‘places’, implying stability, into ‘spaces’, denoting movement and possibility. For De Certeau (1984: 117), a space is ‘a

*practiced place*', and storytelling is crucial to its recuperation, *locating* the self across time, space and context: 'Stories traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories... Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice'. Ford and Harding (2004: 818) argue that place is absorbed into us as narratives, 'onto which we project our understandings of ourselves', through which we order the world; while Massey (2005: 9) conceives of space as 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far', forever in process, never completed. De Certeau (1984: 116) regards the 'tour' as initiating 'geographies of actions' which generate further organizing activity. This point is stressed by Colville et al. (1999), who write that it is 'the process of searching rather than of finding' which proves the more rewarding. As Odysseus discovers on his journey, the challenges encountered provide satisfactions despite their perilous nature, so that his voyage becomes one of self-enlightenment and becoming, 'a journey whose meaning lies in the very act of travelling itself, and not merely in reaching the destination' (Gherardi, 2004: 35).

The narration of life-history interviews is concerned with transitions from one set of personal and organizational circumstances to another. It is analogous to the notion of the odyssey, with *becoming*, journeying towards greater self-knowledge and pleasure (Gabriel, 2004; Townley, 1995). As Czarniawska (2004: 13) writes, 'a life is lived with a goal but the most important aspect of life is the formulation and reformulation of that goal'. Life-history narratives are evolutionary, changing as unforeseen events are accommodated purposefully within the interwoven schema of time, space and meaning. Updating has the purpose of restoring order and (re)establishing self-legitimacy.

### *Legitimacy-claiming*

Our second research question pertains to the ways in which organizational elites claim and maintain self-legitimacy in an unequal world. Legitimacy concerns external validation



(Middleton-Stone & Brush, 1996). To be deemed legitimate, actions must be perceived as 'desirable, proper, or appropriate' within a wider system of social norms and values (Suchman, 1995: 574). Relatively little is known about the processes by which legitimacy is acquired, maintained or forfeited (Sillince & Brown, 2009); but the use of narrative is crucial to its acquisition and maintenance at both an organizational and individual level (Golant & Sillince, 2007). The socially constructed nature of success (or failure) underlines the importance of self-presentation and impression management in legitimating accounts (Brown & Jones, 1998; 2000; Elsbach, 1994; Goffman, 1969; Suchman, 1995; Vaara, 2002; Sillince & Brown, 2009). According to Suchman (1995: 586), legitimacy management depends on a 'diverse arsenal of techniques'. Suchman focuses on organizational claims to legitimacy, differentiated as pragmatic (dependent on audience self-interest), moral (concerned with social approval) and cognitive (to do with taken-for-granted assumptions) (Sillince & Brown, 2009). Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) pinpoint the rhetorical strategies at work in legitimacy-seeking at times of institutional change, while Sillince and Brown (2009) explore the legitimacy claims made by police institutions, examining the multiple identity claims put forward by constabularies to enhance their legitimacy amongst diverse stakeholders.

Vaara (2002: 226), meanwhile, explores four categories of legitimating discourse in narratives of post-merger integration ('rationalistic', 'cultural', 'role-bound' and 'individualistic'), demonstrating how groups and individuals use narratives to legitimate their interests and agendas (Brown, 1994; 1998). The first three of Vaara's categories relate to managers as a collectivity, sub-culture or group. His fourth type of discourse, however, as its name implies, concerns personified actors, exploring success from the perspective of the self. It is this type of discourse with which we are particularly concerned here, pertaining to the highly personalized accounts, the 'individual-level tools' (Elsbach, 1994: 59), produced by business leaders recounting their life histories. Legitimacy is linked to the power position

occupied by managers (Erkama & Vaara, 2010). Goffman (1969: 24) writes that when an individual ‘makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of this kind have a right to expect’. Little is known, however, about the nature of the legitimacy claims advanced by business leaders to justify their position to themselves and others. Life-history narratives provide a means of accessing their attempts to legitimize and (re)frame their accounts of their own success (Sillince & Mueller, 2007).

### **Research process**

The 16 business leaders participating in this study have been known to the researchers and observed in different contexts for many years (see Table 1). The existence of a long-term relationship helped foster an environment in which interviewees felt more inclined to disclose their deeper thoughts and feelings than they might otherwise have done; trust being essential to access ‘the inner world (meanings, ideas, feelings, intentions) or experienced social reality of the interviewee’ (Alvesson, 2003: 16). This is confirmed by the telling of stories never previously told by interviewees; as Donald, a Managing Director in the energy sector, put it: ‘this is the first time I’ve played back to anybody what actually happened’. More dramatically, Piers, a CEO in asset management, divulged his discovery of major fraud: ‘I realized that there was something here which had the capacity to bust the company – to go Barings – and at that second I knew I was the only person in the world who knew it’. While the existence of a prior relationship improved the frankness of interviewees, the researchers having knowledge of their careers which other observers might not have, this does not imply that the interviews were necessarily without bias. The interviewers have an interest in preserving an ongoing relationship; as Goffman (1969: 25) states, ‘few impressions could survive if those who received the impression did not exert tact in their reception of it’.

Following Guest et al. (2006), 16 interviews were considered sufficient for present purposes. The interviews typically were extensive interactions, whose transcribed narratives ranged in length from 6,108 to 28,113 words, with a median of 9,560 words and a mean length of 10,871 words. That they were not generally office-based, often taking place at the interviewee's home, helped foster a relaxing ambience conducive to openness. Each participant was accorded a pseudonym to preserve anonymity.

#### INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Life-history interviews, like stories, are 'relational processes' (Rhodes & Brown, 2005: 173). As such, the response of the interviewer matters (Pye, 2002). Interviews with top directors often assume an explanatory function wherein interviewees seek to account for their organizational actions; as Weick et al. (2005: 416) assert, 'Who we are lies importantly in the hands of others'. Impression management is integral to the day-to-day operations of executives, heavily implicated in how their organizations are perceived (Brown & Jones, 2000; Brown et al., 2008; Goffman, 1969). To tell a good story is vital, 'organizing as explaining' (Pye, 1993) emerging as critical for individual and organizational legitimation (Creed et al., 2002; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). This may encourage individuals to fashion versions of events which are intrinsically self-promoting (Alvesson, 2003; Brown et al., 2008; Vaara, 2002).

The interviewer has an important part to play in the interviewee's sensemaking process. Gabriel (2000) compares this role to that of *fellow-traveller*. The interviewer serves as the Other which, following Derrida's (1976) logic of supplementarity, enables the articulation of the One, recognizing him or her personally as a subject (Ricoeur, 1984). Like the interlocutor of Camus's *The Fall* (1963), the listener, whose approval the interviewee

may desire to enhance self-esteem, has a role to play in legitimation dynamics (Brown, 1994; 1997; 1998; Brown & Jones, 2000; Suchman, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Elite interviewees often exude self-belief, but they must also be credible to others, resonating with wider societal values (Creed et al., 2002; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara, 2002). The interviewer serves thus as ‘social anchor’, facilitating perspective-taking on the part of interviewees by affording access to alternative cognitive frameworks (Sonenshein, 2007). The reactions of others are used to test out and confirm or revise the narrator’s self-conceptions (Gabriel, 1995; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra & Lineback, 2005; Pratt et al., 2006).

We did not ask the interviewees to recount stories directly from their life histories; rather, we asked them to relate their career histories, focusing on their family background, education, critical turning-points and career transitions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. An initial reading of the transcripts identified sensemaking as a key theme, particularly with regard to storytelling. Sensemaking ‘episodes’ regularly emerged as the result of a ‘lesson’ extracted by an interviewee from a given story. Equally, when reflecting upon entire narratives, it became apparent that participants, in varying degrees, were anxious to account for their personal success. We resolved to undertake two complementary data analyses – the first focused on stories and sensemaking, the second on career success and self-legitimization – and to consider the relationships between them.

In analyzing our life-history transcripts, we followed a five-stage procedure. First, we read the transcripts independently and marked up stories, defined for analytical purposes as *an account given by an interviewee of a discrete chapter, episode or series of events within a life-history narrative*. Discrepancies were deliberated and reconciled, and names assigned to the identified stories. Overall, the body of interviews was found to contain a ‘pool’ of 198 stories, ranging from six to 21 stories each, and averaging 12 stories per interview. Next, we

examined the data to discern the specific sensemaking processes at work, assuming an inductive approach, with categories emerging from the stories identified (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whilst resonating with the literature considered above. We searched for evidence of processes which might be expressed in the form of gerunds, asking ourselves, what processes were our interviewees spontaneously enacting in recounting their life-history narratives? Some ‘candidate’ processes were found to occur infrequently and disregarded; sufficient occurrences being necessary across the entire body of interviews to qualify as a discrete sensemaking process. Following several iterations and further reflection, we reached agreement on the central discrete sensemaking processes at work: identified as *locating*, *meaning-making* and *becoming*, and acknowledging that many stories involve more than one sensemaking process. These are defined as follows: *locating* entails situating the self in time, space and context; *meaning-making* signifies espousing personal values, beliefs and convictions; while *becoming* implies explaining transitions from one configuration of personal and/or organizational circumstances to another. In the third stage, we independently coded the sensemaking passages within each story. Differences in coding were resolved to produce a fully coded dataset containing 141 instances of locating, 107 instances of meaning-making and 139 instances of becoming (see Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Fourthly, we re-examined holistically the life-history narratives, seeking to discover how business leaders construct themselves as successful individuals, scrutinizing the data for evidence of legitimacy-claiming. In this we drew inspiration from Gabriel (1995), who uncovers modes of subjectivity in organizational stories, as well as Suchman (1995), Vaara (2002) and Suddaby and Greenwood (2005), who isolate modes of organizational

legitimation. Instances of legitimacy-claiming were identified as belonging to four thematic categories: *defying-the-odds* (triumphing despite adversity); *staying-the-course* (persevering over the years); *succeeding through talent* (earning success through skill and application); and *giving back to society* (sharing success with others). We followed the same analytical procedure as previously, but now taking the full narrative as the unit of analysis, assessing in turn whether there was strong evidence (many instances), weak evidence (few instances) or no evidence for each mode of self-legitimization identified (see Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Finally, we analyzed the data on each of the four modes of self-legitimization drawing on the three sensemaking processes to examine the relationships between them. The linkages between these are articulated in matrix form in Table 4. In the next section, the individual sensemaking processes are discussed in turn as these emerged from the stories recounted by interviewees. This is followed by an analysis of the ways in which participants seek to legitimize their position in life-history narratives.

### **Sensemaking processes and legitimizing success**

#### *Locating*

Individuals require a sense of their place (Goffman, 1969). The storied constructions which individuals create situate them in context, ‘retrospectively “fix[ing]” events in space and time, *legitimizing* a set of perspectives and anchoring their selves’ (Brown et al., 2008: 1053). This enables them to reconcile complexities of location, including dis-location and multiplicities of location (Ford & Harding, 2004; Massey, 2005).

Bringing to life the notion of ‘geographies of actions’ (De Certeau, 1984), one interviewee, Parry, CEO of a media company, when asked early in his career to sell internationally a popular US children’s television programme, began by studying a map:

I looked at the map and I started off. I sold [programme] and then it was just everyone was desperate for it. I flew back two weeks before Christmas. I had a wife and two children, but I had to turn back: “Can you now go to Asia?” So ... I looked at the map again and thought okay, we will start at the bottom in Australia, then we go up to Singapore and then we go to Malaysia and then Hong Kong and Taiwan and sold the show. (Parry, CEO, media)

The map serves as a springboard for a world tour. Within a short space of time, Parry ‘went round the world and sold the show to around 100 countries’. He attributes his success to his sales technique, adding: ‘I was immensely talented at selling’.

Locating oneself in time, space and context demands reference points which are readily understood by the listener, evoking familiar stories from literature and history (Bruner, 1990). Graeme, Executive Chairman of an IT multinational, makes sense of his experience of failing businesses by drawing comparisons with the Titanic – a formidable and familiar reference point:

There were three occasions in my career when I found myself facing very serious issues. Common to all three was the business going fundamentally off track ... Then suddenly you look at this and think, “Hang on, if this continues like this we are in deep trouble”... It is like the Titanic, you can’t believe it is sinking, you have just been served your dessert and the coffee is coming up, and the band is playing, and it is all so unreal. I think one of the qualities... of a leader is putting the situation in perspective and the ability to sit back and say this is going seriously wrong and to do it quickly. (Graeme, Chairman, IT)

Graeme’s reference to the Titanic, through which he appropriates a well-known discursive resource, which propels him to an epic style of self-narrative, instills in the mind of the listener the salient image of a sinking vessel, conveying the enormity of the task at hand. The listener’s prior knowledge that the Titanic was doomed underlines the fact that getting the businesses back on track was greatly against the odds, highlighting Graeme’s capability in averting disaster.

The nature of sensemaking as locating, and its association with organizing, especially for business leaders, is illustrated by Lloyd, Executive Chairman for Europe of an IT multinational, who situates himself squarely as an organization man: ‘My own story is one of those stories within a story, which are the [company’s] story and my role within [the company] and not me as a separate person’. Lloyd found himself featured in the autobiography of a famous CEO, then his immediate boss: ‘I’m on page three as the cleaner that let him in at 8.30 because he didn’t have a badge – quite fascinating that I’m portrayed as the cleaner.’ There are several examples of ‘organization men’ within our sample. None expressed identification with the organization as starkly as Lloyd; his self-esteem seemingly boosted by an enduring association with the blue-chip IT multinational with which he spent almost his entire career (Brown, 1997). A poor boy from a Yorkshire mining village, he relates how his boss wrote to him at the end of his first working week: ‘His parting line in the letter was, “I hope to help you achieve your ambition to be the Joe Lampton [hero of *Room at the Top* by John Braine] of [the company]”.’

At the time of the interview, Lloyd was due to return to his former school to address its alumni. A story had appeared in the local newspaper, anticipating his visit in terms of the return of the conquering hero:

My school has just contacted me and asked me to speak to the old boys...The whole town’s getting excited. My mother has sent me copies of the [local paper], which talks about, “Computer exec comes home to his roots.” The article says something like, “the old boys will learn how to make better use of their computer skills when Lloyd returns to speak”. (Lloyd, Chairman, IT)

It is interesting here that Lloyd does not wish to over-claim the epic-ness of the narrative himself, attributing this rather to his home town.

### *Meaning-making*



‘Experience is meaningful’, Madison (1988: 99-100) claims, ‘precisely because it can be *recounted*.’ Meaning-making is a process which often culminates in the expression of an opinion, belief, or a lesson for others (Gabriel, 2000). Piers, a CEO in asset management, emphasizes the importance of learning to make decisions from the bedrock of his core values. This proved critical when he uncovered fraudulent behaviour by a dealer that threatened to bring down the company, as mentioned above. Piers dealt with the crisis counter-intuitively, calling in the regulators and offering to resign:

It became apparent ... that we had a significant regulatory issue which needed reporting to the regulators... There were a whole series of people working for me who were going to be disciplined. I judged that if I offered me to them then they got the head of the business rather than a whole load of other people for whom it would not be fair to suffer ... Over my career I have come to the view that you would only be consistent if you are making decisions from your own core values which you know and understand, rather than being chameleon-like in your principles. (Piers, CEO, asset management)

Piers took a considerable risk in tendering his resignation to ensure others would not be punished unjustly nor the enterprise jeopardised. The notion of leaders sacrificing themselves for the good of others taps into epic tales of courage. Here, Piers is recast as hero and saviour of the company against the odds (Gabriel, 1995); though he admits to a ‘deep gut feel’ that his resignation would not be accepted (it was not).

That meaning-making is bound up with moral values is likewise exemplified by Graeme, who, as trustee of a charity providing international aid, undertook a ‘field trip’ to the Congo:

Some months back I decided that I would like to go on a field trip. When you are chairing a charity, acting as a trustee on a board and trying to raise money ... it does help if you have actually seen it. They thought this was fantastic because they’d never had a trustee want to do a field trip before. They decided to send me to the troubled western part of the Congo... There are seven main armies, but also much smaller groups made up of teenage boys, who are armed to the teeth... Since I got back there was a massacre, last week, very near to where I was staying. I must say that it did increase my admiration for the staff working out there. (Graeme, Chairman, IT)

The primary message conveyed here is that business must be about more than financial gain to be meaningful. In this story, Graeme goes beyond the call of duty – insisting that no trustee

had ever gone on a field trip before – presenting himself in a caring light which is likely to attract esteem (Brown, 1994; Creed et al., 2002; Mills, 1940; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In the Congo, he experiences the perils encountered daily by the charity’s staff, and learns to appreciate their contribution more deeply. On return, he can speak more authoritatively when fundraising; deriving personal legitimacy from his adventure, displaying a social conscience whilst drawing on powerfully emotive discourses relating to Africa, poverty and inequality.

The business leaders in our sample not only make meaning for themselves, but importantly, also for others, within their companies and beyond, ‘the offer of explanations that make working life seem meaningful [being] valuable in and of themselves’ (Brown, 1997: 664). At times, the meaning they make defies convention. One such story is recounted by Mark, CEO of a food company, who in the late 1970s was given the poisoned chalice of turning around a Liverpool-based subsidiary. To succeed, he needed both unions and management on side:

I got together the senior management and the union leaders and I said, “I know some of you think I have come up here to close the business down, but I have not. If we work together, I will bust a gut to make our business profitable without making anyone redundant ... I am making it a personal promise!” That got people saying, “Okay, he has promised he ... is going to fight for jobs here if we work with him.” So they gave me some benefit of the doubt. I went in and within my first month, I did the dirtiest job in there, tray washing. The middle management was absolutely appalled... But the union could see that what I was trying to do was to take people into account and not profit at their expense. They gradually stopped being anti and tried to help in resolving issues. (Mark, CEO, food)

Mark’s story illustrates how sensemaking is bound up with its corollary, sensegiving, without which sensemaking arguably is incomplete (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick et al, 2005). Humphreys et al. (2012) emphasize the sensegiving power of storytelling, which, for leaders, is critical to the production of belief. Meaning-making matters to our interviewees because, as business leaders, they need to carry others with them in the meaning they create (Bean & Hamilton, 2006; Czarniawska-Joerges & Wolff, 1991). Mark’s tray-washing episode signals to unions and management alike that they are in this together. Though controversial, it

accords him a new legitimacy in the battle for survival, demonstrating that compartmentalized attitudes must change. Mark issues a message the workforce can identify with – that he would fight to avoid redundancies – so that they accord him leeway to take tough decisions (Creed et al., 2002). Meaning-making is not a passive exercise; as Angus, head of a recruitment company, expressed it, ‘*you need a story you can sell*’.

### *Becoming*

Ricoeur (1984: 150) points to the ‘directedness’ of a story, by whose development the listener or reader is ‘pulled forward’ through time. In narration, he argues, there are three senses of time: ‘a present of past things’ which is memory; a ‘present of present things’ which is perception; and a ‘present of future things’ which is expectation. While drawing on the past and present, becoming is nevertheless inherently future oriented, directed towards what lies ahead. As James, CEO of a shipbuilding company, asserts, a leader should be ‘alive to a world that is becoming; where the pace of change is faster... and where all of that might lead us’. An important aspect of his life journey has been the notion of constant discovery, never attaining a permanent resting-point: ‘You never reach any plane, there’s always still a mountain of knowledge to climb’.

The importance of looking to the future is highlighted by Donald, a Managing Director in the energy sector. He tells a story about tricky negotiations with the Chinese and Russians over the construction of a gas pipeline. He relates how, in such talks, he seeks to ‘articulate beyond the now’, illustrating his point with reference to an invitation from a Chinese negotiator to visit some caves:

I always try to articulate beyond the now ... I always try to have a part of my *modus operandi* that allows us to move to possibilities, because we tend always to be captured in the now... In the Chinese case the negotiator said to me, “Next time you come to Beijing, Donald, you have to see these caves”... “What are these caves?” I say to him. “Well, we need to show you, there’s some good geology there, I want you to see these caves”. And so you’ve entered this dynamic. That’s what I call moving on beyond the now, because

they are almost saying to me, “Yes, okay, we’ll fix that for that meeting. But, you need to come and see these caves”. (Donald, Managing Director, energy)

The invitation enables Donald to move beyond the current position, in which the parties risked becoming entrenched. The implicit assumption is that there is sufficient agreement to move forward to whatever lies ahead. Donald’s was the longest discrete story to emerge at interview, testifying over several hours to his negotiating skills in the tale of an ambitious quest to take gas ‘from Siberia to Beijing and beyond’.

Looking to the future is also about living in the real world. Business leaders are *doers*, agential protagonists for whom possibilities are meaningful only if they are actualized.

Approaching retirement, Parry, the founder of a global media company, contemplates an easier future, while still seizing the moment, turning emergent possibility into reality:

I’m going to teach a couple of media courses [at university] and I’ve made a few donations. I’m quite involved in the cancer research trust... I had a young man to lunch on Sunday, and he is in the property business. He asked me when he would know to make the move to step out on his own. The answer I gave was “yesterday”, because the most difficult decision to make is the decision to do it. (Parry, CEO, media)

Parry’s voluntary and charity work is of ongoing importance to him. Giving back to society was referred to by many of our interviewees, for several of whom it had become ‘the future’.

An illustration is provided by Mark, who recounts how he started Breakfast Clubs for deprived schoolchildren:

We started the Breakfast Clubs back in the late 90s and we’ve now got 125 of them ... Basically it’s providing a free breakfast in disadvantaged areas in primary schools. The other part of the model is to get the community involved so it’s run by volunteers. It gave people a reason to get out of bed in a morning ... I want to see if I can help push the peanut up the hill and go on helping to try and sort these things out. *That’s the future.* (Mark, CEO, food)

Mark’s professed goal is to help ‘*push the peanut up the hill*’. Such philanthropic accounts of giving back confer a powerful source of legitimacy on business leaders who generally lead very privileged lives.

### *Legitimizing success*

Overlaying and infusing the sensemaking processes exhibited by business leaders in life-history narratives is an ongoing search for legitimacy. Each of the four modes of legitimacy-seeking identified – *defying-the-odds*; *staying-the-course*; *succeeding through talent*; and *giving back to society* – through which business leaders cast themselves as successful individuals, makes a different appeal to legitimacy, while all serve to bolster the subjects' self-esteem (Brown, 1994; Brown & Jones, 1998; 2000).

Claims to legitimacy which present the interviewee as *defying-the-odds*, triumphing despite adversity in situations which might initially appear to be 'mission impossible', emphasize the business acumen, cunning and bravery of the interviewee (Vaara, 2002: 235). Graeme's realization that his organization was in trouble highlights his perspicacity while attributing blame for its near-demise to others (Brown & Jones, 1998); the board, blind to the company's problems:

There was no sense on the board, despite them being well qualified, of drama or doom. They just hadn't stepped back to see the way the whole thing was going... It must be like the captain of a ship that is sinking. You are not thinking of individual passengers... The satisfaction is in thinking, "if I wasn't there this would not exist anymore". Whether this is recognized widely or not doesn't bother me. When you face really bad problems you can't take the credit without publicizing what the problems were. (Graeme, Chairman, IT)

Despite Graeme's insistence that he does not crave applause for rescuing the company, such stories depict the interviewee as hero (Gabriel, 1995); a mode of legitimation employed strongly by seven of our 16 interviewees and implied more subtly by a further two. *Defying-the-odds* involves the allocation of agency. In Graeme's case, agency is attributed in a way which may appear intrinsically self-serving (Brown, 1997), evoking the 'illusion of control' which dominant actors may experience at critical moments (Vaara, 2002: 240). As Angus, CEO of a recruitment company, states, on realizing his business was going to the wall, 'I suppose you just go and snatch the driving wheel'. At times *defying-the odds* assumes the form of rags-to-riches stories, overcoming deprivation, as recounted by three interviewees

(Lloyd, Malcolm and Parry). Lloyd, for example, attributes his success partly to ‘the grounding in violence’ he experienced as a youngster inhabiting a ‘sink’ estate, which sharpened his verbal and social skills (‘I could always handle it and talk myself out of it’).

Appeals to legitimacy are also made by interviewees through accounts of *staying-the-course*, presenting successful business leaders as resolute in the face of organizational flux. Ten interviewees staked strong claims to legitimacy by virtue of tenacity, and a further two implied that staying-power was a factor in their success. Angus, at the helm of his recruitment business for more than 40 years, had seen it through three recessions:

It’s not just a matter of just closing things. You make a bigger loss in the end. So you are nursing things along. You have got to keep people’s belief in you... Each recession brought its own problems... I tried to keep a sense of reason. I remembered that a lot of people were worse off. You look for every inch of value in the balance sheet you can find. Then you go searching for profits. (Angus, CEO, recruitment)

*Staying-the-course* confers personal legitimacy within the company, denoting resilience and commitment (Brown, 1997), while securing employees’ belief in the leader. The implicit message is that, whilst others may lack persistence, the steadfast leader has the necessary staying-power to deliver success. Parry, CEO of a global media company, claims that persistence supersedes financial gain: ‘there comes a stage where you are more interested in seeing it through and asking, “Can we be the very best?”’ Nevertheless, remaining at one company might be perceived as eschewing new challenges. Mark, a CEO for 25 years, counters this charge robustly – ‘I say “no, it’s different all the time; the job is alive and it changes and the dynamics are different and markets are different, so always you have got to be energetic and focused”’ – thereby implying that *staying-the-course* may still go hand-in-hand with *becoming*.

Business leaders often exude a strong sense of personal achievement, portraying themselves as self-made men, signifying that they have earned their position on merit, through skill and application, *succeeding through talent*. All participants make legitimacy

claims on this count, 11 strongly, and those from less affluent backgrounds are often robust about this. Malcolm, COO at a global airline, who left school without qualifications, and might have deduced he was ‘beyond any chance of getting an education’, draws a different conclusion: ‘it was all about feeling I could do something better than those around me’. Handed the job of sorting out the airline catering business, he used the common ground of cricket to improve the work performance of its Asian employees:

When India was over for a cricket match, I got installed these moving signs that you see in Piccadilly. I got somebody to sit by the radio putting up the scores... Then I started to put up punctuality information with the scores, and we got the most phenomenal performance. They would come over and chat and put their arms round me. I was a god in this place. We really turned it around and all I had done was to treat them like human beings.  
(Malcolm, COO, airline)

Such expressions of self-belief instill confidence and command support (Brown, 1994).

Stories containing self-enhancing explanations, however, may border on self-aggrandizement or narcissism (Brown, 1997), evident in Malcolm’s comment that he was ‘a god in this place’, which, if overplayed, are counter-productive. Malcolm seeks to avoid over-claiming by modestly suggesting he had done no more than treat the workers like people. However, his choice of personal pronouns is revealing: ‘*we* [the airline] got the most phenomenal performance’ contrasting with ‘all *I* [he alone] had done was to treat them like human beings’, suggesting that he claims this success as his own, while drawing on wider legitimizing notions of cultural inclusion.

Arguably, the most potent legitimizing tactic deployed by business leaders in life-history narratives is the claim of *giving back to society*. Charitable giving is a fundamental aspect of the elite equation, part of the accepted archetype for business elites (Bourdieu, 1977). It features in all but three of the life-history narratives, four strongly and nine more subtly, impressing the researchers by power of understatement since many sit on the boards of important charities (see Table 1). The notion of *giving back* allows business leaders to draw in their storytelling on broader societal norms, tapping into discourses of social

inclusion/exclusion (Brown, 1994; Suchman, 1995; Creed et al., 2002). Being able to give back to society is itself an indicator of success, signifying the relative distance from necessity which economic capital provides (Bourdieu, 1996). Accounts of *giving back* include Graeme's visit to the Congo and Marks's breakfast clubs. Lloyd, who tells of his voluntary work in inner cities, describes this simply as 'a platform' from which he can 'give back':

I've now found a platform from which I can give back... I have strange views on charities... I got my first pair of shoes from a charity. I don't think that people involved in charity have a good idea of what that feels like... I'd rather take the child and teach them something. (Lloyd, Chairman, IT)

Lloyd's preference is to give back in kind rather than engage in philanthropic behaviour. He eschews charities, which remind him too starkly of his roots. This category of *giving back* is analogous at the individual level to the moral form of organizational legitimacy highlighted by Suchman (1995), in that it draws on normative approval. Altruism, however, as Suchman insists, does not mean 'interest-free' (p. 579). In attracting public esteem, *giving back* promotes the ongoing activities of business elites as they build and manage their careers, which, as agentic selves, even in 'retirement', are still in a process of *becoming*.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper has identified and explicated the sensemaking processes embedded within the stories recorded in the life-history narratives of business elites, defined as *locating*, *meaning-making* and *becoming*. Locating concerns the creation of an axis of reference in time and space, narratives providing 'spatial syntaxes' which regulate transitions from one context to another (De Certeau, 1984: 115). Meaning-making (re)affirms the unity of the individual by joining together fragments of experience into a coherent whole through the espousal of personal values and convictions. The weaving of events and episodes into an unfolding story intimates a sense of the becoming of things. Interviewees use stories to demonstrate how and why their personal or organizational circumstances evolve at particular turning-points in their



careers (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In this way, becoming brings together the major transitions over the sweep of a life, whilst projecting forwards in anticipation of future change.

Storytelling and the sensemaking processes identified in this paper are intimately related to modes of *self-legitimation*. The relationships between the three sensemaking processes and each of the four modes of legitimacy-claiming expressed by business leaders in accounting for their success are explicated in Table 4, which demonstrates how the skilful practitioner can deploy stories-of-the-self to project the right image at the right time.

Storytelling provides an effective vehicle for legitimacy-claiming by business leaders. Stories told may be recalled later and propagated further (Vaara, 2002), their immediate nature facilitating a connection with the listener, amplifying the message. The maintenance of self-legitimacy depends on adept communication; like storytelling, it requires a relationship with an audience (Suchman, 1995). Camus's protagonist in *The Fall* is forever compelled to seek out a new interlocutor, demonstrating that the pressures for legitimacy are never-ending (Middleton-Stone & Brush, 1996). Since stories may be repeated and reworked, making sense of circumstances which may be innately equivocal, storytelling lends itself to the process of maintaining legitimacy (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 1995; Creed et al., 2002).

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

Each of the four modes of self-legitimation identified within the life-history narratives of business elites are used to create an impression and serve a purpose. Through the four modes of legitimacy discussed above, business leaders depict themselves as successful and worthy human beings located in a particular time, space or organization to which they belong; make meaning to persuade a social audience to identify with their messages; and

build their futures in the field of power. *Defying-the-odds* locates the narrator in situations of great difficulty, demonstrating courage and fortitude, expressing the emergence of a hero (Gabriel, 1995; Vaara, 2002). Allusions to *staying-the-course* anchor the individual within the company as a trusted leader, emphasizing loyalty, determination and the will to succeed (Brown, 1997), and expressing the emergence of a leader who will see the company through as yet unforeseen crises. References to *succeeding through talent*, an insistent refrain within our narratives, signal that the narrator has succeeded through his or her own efforts, engendering the production of belief necessary to inspire stakeholders and attract resource-holders, and pointing the way to further success. Allusions to *giving back* locate the leader as having accumulated material success and reputation, while conveying the impression of a compassionate individual who places the well-being of society above narrow self-interest. Such stories express the emergence of a more complete human being who selflessly shares the fruits of success with others. As Mark explains, ‘successful people and successful companies have got an obligation to society, *because that’s what civilization is about*’.

These claims to self-legitimacy are most effective when the message is not overt but couched in accounts of socially desirable activities (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). This enables the narrator to reap a profit of ostensible disinterestedness, appearing ‘on the hither side of calculation and in the illusion of the most “authentic” sincerity’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 214). This is not to allege that his or her motivation is inauthentic (Mills, 1940); but merely to acknowledge that there are ‘certain arenas in which self-interest is considered morally laudable, or in which social conscience is considered personally rewarding’ (Suchman, 1995: 585). *Giving back* may also deflect attention from the leader’s own wealth and privilege, mitigating public envy and helping to assuage personal feelings of guilt.

In staking claims to self-legitimacy, business leaders may have a wider purpose beyond impression management and the enhancement of self-esteem (Brown, 1994; 1997; 1998; Brown & Jones, 1998; 2000; Elsbach, 1994). As multi-positional actors within the field of power (Harvey & Maclean, 2008; Maclean et al., 2006), they make common cause with others in issue-based coalitions formed to secure favourable legislative and resourcing decisions. A good reputation is a crucial element in any campaign to win elite and public support for their objectives. In world-making struggles, through which successful elites use their power to accumulate more power and extend their influence, they require support for the propagation of their meaning-making ideas (Bourdieu, 1996; Clegg et al., 2006). The storytelling of business leaders is linked to the dynamics of power because, as active agents occupying command posts, they deploy interpretations of events which further their personal and organizational interests, legitimating preferred outcomes (Brown, 1994; 1998; Maclean et al., 2010; Suchman, 1995). Viewed in this light, their power also rests on their ability to determine meaning (Pemer & Näslund, 2012).

Organizational elites may also be alert to the precariousness of their own authority (Adler et al., 2007). Individualistic epic stories, such as those recounted above, have a part to play in preserving place within the elite, demonstrating fitness to lead, warding off potential challengers and safeguarding control. The exchange of such stories forges common bonds amongst peers, fostering the fellow-feeling that comes with membership and distancing elites further from those who are excluded from this highly select group. Through such epic tales, those who occupy a place in or who have gained entry to the elite assert their claim to rightful membership. In this way, such stories also serve the collective interests of the business elite by helping to reinforce existing structures of domination.

This article makes a contribution to the study of storytelling and sensemaking by elite organizational actors, both of which remain under-researched. It contributes to the literature

on legitimacy by providing a more nuanced understanding of business leaders' attempts to (re)frame their accounts of their own success. Our contribution to theory is twofold. First, we have responded to calls for more research on sensemaking processes in narratives (Brown et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007); identifying and explicating the three processes – *locating*, *meaning-making* and *becoming* – elicited from the stories told by business elites within life-history narratives. We highlight the importance for business leaders of narratives for sensemaking in a processual world. What distinguishes the life-history narratives of business elites is, we suggest, their emphasis on meaning-making, not only for themselves in the stories they tell about their own lives, but also for others within their organizations, whom they must carry with them to remain in the vanguard of business leaders (Bean & Hamilton, 2006). In this way, their accounts of meaning making in their organizations are themselves meaning making, in that they often result in the emergence of an opinion, a belief or a lesson for others. Above all, they present their success as deserved and further legitimized by the act of giving back to society.

Second, we add to the literature on legitimizing accounts (Creed et al., 2002; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara, 2002), by demonstrating how business leaders use sensemaking narratives as a means of legitimacy-claiming in life-history interviews. Viewed in this light, their storytelling becomes a vehicle for claiming legitimacy, life-history narratives representing a powerful legitimizing device. Through our examination of the discursive construction of success in their life-history narratives, we make a contribution to the work of Vaara (2002). More specifically, by eliciting the common legitimizing themes embedded in their accounts, we contribute to the literature on legitimacy by building on the individualistic discourse identified by Vaara, to shed new light on the dynamics of personal legitimacy claims made by business leaders, through which they justify their success to themselves and others. By portraying themselves variously as *defying-the-odds* (heroic), *staying-the-course*

(steadfast), *succeeding through talent* (meritorious) and *giving back to society* (altruistic), they rationalize their prerogatives and shore up elitism.

The limitations of the present research include the relatively small size of the sample of life-history interviews analyzed, and the focus on business elites of a single country at a particular point in time. Temporally and spatially comparative studies might provide a useful means of evaluating and building upon the ideas presented here. We do not suggest that the sensemaking processes we have identified are exhaustive, nor that the legitimating constructions employed in their narratives are the only ones which might be used, and plainly, there is a need to examine further the ways in which storytelling and sensemaking inform organizational processes (Brown et al., 2008), which, for reasons of space and focus, this article has touched on only tangentially. The storytelling, sensemaking and self-legitimizing practices of elite business actors within the field of power merit further attention. Since their stories serve to reinforce existing structures of domination by helping to preserve place within the elite, the inertial force of the sensemaking stories of elite business leaders is, we suggest, a topic worthy of further research (Pemer & Näslund, 2012). For the present we observe that in a world where reputations are hard won but easily lost, business leaders must nurture a life-history narrative which is perceived as legitimate if their careers are to remain on track, in a process of becoming. This is likely to serve them well through the creative evolution of their organizational journeys.

## **Acknowledgements**

This article benefitted from research funded by the Leverhulme Trust (grant number RF/10477) and Reed Charity. The authors wish to thank the business leaders concerned for kindly agreeing to be interviewed; and John Sillince for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We also wish to thank the guest editors of the Special Issue, Ian Colville,

Andrew Brown and Annie Pye and three anonymous *Human Relations* reviewers for their thoughtful and helpful comments throughout the review process.

## References

- Adler, P.S., Forbes, L.C. & Willmott, H. Critical management studies. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 2007, 1, 119-79.
- Alvesson, M. Beyond neopositivists, romanticists, and localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organizational research. *Academy of Management Review*, 2003, 28, 13-33.
- Alvesson, M. & Skoldberg, K. *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*. Sage: London, 2000.
- Bean, C & Hamilton, F.E. Leader framing and follower sensemaking: Response to downsizing in the brave new workplace. *Human Relations*, 2006, 59, 321-349.
- Boje, D.M. *Narrative methods for organizational and communication research*. London: Sage, 2001.
- Boje, D.M. *Storytelling organizations*. London: Sage, 2008.
- Bourdieu, P. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: CUP, 1977.
- Bourdieu, P. *The state nobility: Elite schools in the field of power*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996.
- Brown, A.D. Politics, symbolic action and myth making in pursuit of legitimacy. *Organization Studies*, 1994, 15, 861-78.
- Brown, A.D. Narcissism, identity, and legitimacy. *Academy of Management Review*, 1997, 22, 643-86.
- Brown, A.D. Narrative, politics and legitimacy in an IT implementation. *Journal of Management Studies*, 1998, 35, 35-58.
- Brown, A.D. A narrative approach to collective identities. *Journal of Management Studies*, 2006, 43, 731-53.
- Brown, A.D. & Jones, M. Doomed to failure: Narratives of inevitability and conspiracy in a failed IS project. *Organization Studies*, 1998, 19, 73-88.
- Brown, A.D. & Jones, M. Honourable members and dishonourable deeds: Sensemaking, impression management and legitimation in the 'Arms to Iraq Affair'. *Human Relations*, 2000, 53, 655-89.
- Brown, A.D., Stacey, P. & Nandhakumar, J. Making sense of sensemaking narratives. *Human Relations*, 2008, 61, 1035-62.
- Bruner, J. *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Camus, A. *The fall*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963.

- Chia, R. From modern to postmodern organizational analysis. *Organization Studies*, 1995, 16, 579-604.
- Clegg, S.R., Courpasson, D. & Philips, N. *Power and organizations*. London: Sage, 2006.
- Colville, I.D., Waterman, R.H. and Weick, K.E. Organizing and the search for excellence: making sense of the times in theory and practice. *Organization*, 1999, 6, 129-48.
- Creed, W.E.D., Scully, M.A. & Austin, J.R. Clothes make the person? The tailoring of legitimating accounts and the social construction of identity. *Organization Science*, 2002, 13, 475-96.
- Czarniawska, B. *A narrative approach to organization studies*. London: Sage, 1998.
- Czarniawska, B. *Narratives in social science research*. London: Sage, 2004.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. & Wolff, R. Leaders, managers, entrepreneurs on and off the organizational stage. *Organization Studies*, 1991, 12, 529-46.
- De Certeau, M. *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.
- Derrida, J. *Of grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Edwardes, M. *Back from the brink*. London: Collins, 1983.
- Elsbach, K.D. Managing organizational legitimacy in the California cattle industry: The construction and effectiveness of verbal accounts. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1994, 39, 57-88.
- Erkama, N. and Vaara, E. Struggles over legitimacy in global organizational restructuring: A rhetorical perspective on legitimation strategies and dynamics in a shutdown case. *Organization Studies*, 2010, 31, 813-39.
- Ford, J. & Harding, N. We went looking for an organization but could only find the metaphysics of its presence. *Sociology*, 2004, 38, 815-30.
- Gabriel, Y. The unmanaged organization: Stories, fantasies and subjectivity. *Organization Studies*, 1995, 16, 477-501.
- Gabriel, Y. *Storytelling in organizations: Facts, fictions and fantasies*. Oxford: OUP, 2000.
- Gabriel, Y. The narrative veil: Truths and untruths in storytelling. In Y. Gabriel (Ed), *Myths, stories and organizations: Premodern narratives for our times*. Oxford: OUP, 2004, pp. 17-31.
- Gherardi, S. Knowing as desire: Dante's Ulysses at the end of the known world. In Y. Gabriel (Ed), *Myths, stories and organizations, op. cit.*, pp. 32-48.



- Gioia, D.A. & Chittipeddi, K. Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 1991, 12, 433-48.
- Gioia, D.A., Schultz, M. & Corley, K.G. Organizational identity, image and adaptive instability. *Academy of Management Review*, 2000, 25, 63-81.
- Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A. *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967.
- Goffman, E. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1969.
- Golant, B.D. & Sillince, J.A.A. The constitution of organizational legitimacy: A narrative perspective. *Organization Studies*, 2007, 28, 1149-67.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. & Johnson, L. How many interviews are enough? An experimentation with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 2006, 18, 59-82.
- Harvey, C. & Maclean, M. Capital theory and the dynamics of elite business networks in Britain and France. *The Sociological Review*, 2008, 56, 105-20.
- Humphreys, M., Ucbasaran, D. & Lockett, A. Sensemaking and sensegiving stories of jazz leadership. *Human Relations*, 2012, 65, forthcoming.
- Iacocca, L. *Iacocca: an autobiography*. New York: Bantam, 1984.
- Ibarra, H. & Barbulescu, R. Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness and consequences of narrative identity work in macro work role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 2010, 35, 135-54.
- Ibarra, H. & Lineback, K. What's your story? *Harvard Business Review*, 2005, 83, 65-71.
- Ingold, T. *The perception of the environment*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Lounsbury, M. & Glynn, M.A. Cultural entrepreneurship: Stories, legitimacy, and the acquisition of resources. *Strategic Management Journal*, 2001, 22, 545-64.
- Maclean, M., Harvey, C. & Chia, R. Dominant corporate agents and the power elite in France and Britain. *Organization Studies*, 2010, 31, 327-48.
- Maclean, M., Harvey, C. & Press, J. *Business elites and corporate governance in France and the UK*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Madison, G.B. *The hermeneutics of postmodernity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Massey, D. *For space*. London: Sage, 2005.
- Middleton-Stone, M. & Brush, C.G. Planning in ambiguous contexts: The dilemma of meeting needs for commitment and demands for legitimacy. *Strategic Management Journal*, 1996, 17, 633-52.

- Mills, C.W. Situated actions and vocabularies of motive. *American Sociological Review*, 1940, 5, 904-913.
- Pemer, F. & Näslund, L. Dominant stories as a source of organizational inertia. *Human Relations*, 2012, 65, forthcoming.
- Pratt, M.G., Rockmann, K.W. & Kaufmann, J.R. Constructing professional identity: The role of work and identity learning cycles in the customization of identity among medical residents. *Academy of Management Journal*, 2006, 49, 235-62.
- Pye, A. 'Organizing as explaining' and the doing of managing: an integrative appreciation of the processes of organizing. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 1993, 2, 157-68.
- Pye, A. The changing power of 'explanations': Directors, academics and their sensemaking from 1989 to 2000. *Journal of Management Studies*, 2002, 39, 907-25.
- Rhodes, C. & Brown, A.D. Narrative, organizations and research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 2005, 7, 167-88.
- Ricoeur, P. *Time and narrative*, 1. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Scott, M.B. & Lyman, S.M. Accounts. *American Sociological Review*, 1968, 33, 46-62.
- Sillince, J.A.A. & Brown, A.D. Multiple organizational identities and legitimacy: The rhetoric of police websites. *Human Relations*, 2009, 62, 1829-56.
- Sillince, J. & Mueller, F. Switching strategic responsibility: The reframing of accounts of responsibility. *Organization Studies*, 28, 155-76.
- Sonenshein, S. The role of construction, intuition, and justification in responding to ethical issues at work: The sensemaking-intuition model. *Academy of Management Review*, 2007, 32, 1022-40.
- Suchman, M.C. Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review*, 1995, 20, 571-610.
- Suddaby, R. & Greenwood, R. Rhetorical strategies of legitimacy. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2005, 50, 35-67.
- Sveningsson, S. & Alvesson, M. Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations*, 2003, 56, 1163-93.
- Townley, B. 'Know thyself': Self-awareness, self-formation and managing. *Organization*, 1995, 2, 271-89.
- Tsoukas, H. & Chia, R. On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science*, 2002, 13, 567-82.

Vaara, E. On the discursive construction of success/failure in narratives of post-merger integration. *Organization Studies*, 2002, 23, 211-48.

Weick, K.E. *Sensemaking in organizations*. London: Sage, 1995.

Weick, K.E. *Making sense of the organization*, vol. 2: *The impermanent organization*. Chichester: John Wiley, 2009.

Weick, K.E., Sutcliffe, K.M. & Obstfeld, D. Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 2005, 16, 409-21.

Whittle, A. & Mueller, F. Bankers in the dock: Moral storytelling in action. *Human Relations*, 2012, 65, forthcoming.

**Table 1: Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Executive Career Sector</b>	<b>Top Executive Role and Reach*</b>	<b>Non-Executive Roles**</b>	<b>Time Known (years)</b>
Alan	Private-Oxbridge	Food & Drink	CEO, Global	PC, PB, CF, ED, CU	7
Angus	Grammar	Employment Services	Chairman and CEO, National	CF, BA, ED	20
David	Grammar-University	Law	Managing Partner, National	PC, PV, PB, CF, BA, ED	7
Donald	Private-University	Energy	Managing Director, Global	CF, BA	9
Graeme	Grammar-University	Information Technology	Executive Chairman, Global Region	PC, PV, PB, CF, BA, ED, CU	18
Irwin	Grammar-University	Aerospace	Managing Director, Global Region	PV, PB, BA, ED	8
James	Grammar-University	Shipbuilding	CEO, Global	PC, PV, PB, CF, BA, ED	4
Joe	Grammar-University	Investment Banking	Vice-President, Global Region	PV, BA	3
Leo	Private-Oxbridge	Retailing	CEO, National	PC, PV, CF, CU	10
Lloyd	Grammar-University	Information Technology	Executive Chairman, Global Region	PB, BA, ED	9
Malcolm	Secondary Modern	Airline	Chief Operating Officer, Global	PV, CF, BA	17
Mark	Private-Accounting	Food & Drink	CEO, National	CF, BA	3
Parry	Secondary Modern	Media	Chairman and CEO, Global	CF	6
Piers	Grammar-University	Asset Management	CEO, Global	CF, BA, ED	19
Ralph	Private-University	Engineering	Managing Director, Global	PC, PV, PB, CF, ED	4
Wayne	Private-Oxbridge	Investment Banking	Managing Director, Global	PC, PV, PB, CF, ED, CU	8

*Notes:*

\*Global refers to worldwide responsibilities. Global region refers to a multi-country territory. National means UK.

\*\*Column refers to non-executive director roles by type of organization. PC = public company. PV = private company. PB = public body. CF = charitable foundation. BA = business association. ED = educational institution. CU = cultural institution.

**Table 2: Storytelling and sensemaking**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Number of Stories Told</b>	<b>Number (&amp; %) of Stories Invoking Sensemaking Processes</b>		
		<b>Locating</b>	<b>Meaning-making</b>	<b>Becoming</b>
Alan	7	6 (86)	4 (57)	6 (86)
Angus	17	7 (41)	15 (88)	10 (59)
David	7	4 (57)	5 (71)	4 (57)
Donald	18	12 (75)	10 (56)	16 (89)
Graeme	10	7 (70)	3 (30)	7 (70)
Irwin	6	3 (50)	2 (33)	5 (83)
James	9	5 (56)	5 (56)	5 (56)
Joe	9	6 (67)	5 (56)	8 (89)
Leo	18	12 (67)	7 (39)	14 (78)
Lloyd	16	13 (81)	11 (69)	7 (44)
Malcolm	21	17 (81)	11 (52)	13 (62)
Mark	15	15 (100)	10 (67)	13 (87)
Parry	15	12 (80)	3 (20)	13 (87)
Piers	9	4 (44)	7 (78)	5 (56)
Ralph	14	11 (79)	5 (36)	10 (71)
Wayne	7	7 (100)	4 (57)	3 (43)
<b>Totals</b>	198	141 (71)	107 (54)	139 (70)

**Table 3: Legitimacy-claiming modes in life-history narratives**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Nature and Strength of Claim (Strong, Weak or None)</b>			
	<b>Defying the Odds</b>	<b>Staying the Course</b>	<b>Succeeding through Talent</b>	<b>Giving Back to Society</b>
Alan	None	Strong	Weak	Strong
Angus	Strong	Strong	Strong	Weak
David	Weak	None	Strong	Weak
Donald	None	Strong	Strong	None
Graeme	Strong	None	Strong	Strong
Irwin	None	Strong	Weak	None
James	None	Strong	Strong	Weak
Joe	None	None	Strong	Weak
Leo	None	Weak	Strong	Weak
Lloyd	Strong	Strong	Strong	Weak
Malcolm	Strong	Strong	Strong	Weak
Mark	Strong	Strong	Weak	Strong
Parry	Strong	Strong	Strong	Weak
Piers	Strong	Strong	Weak	None
Ralph	Weak	Weak	Strong	Weak
Wayne	None	None	Weak	Strong

**Table 4: Sensemaking and legitimizing in life-history narratives**

<b>Modes of Legitimizing</b>	<b>Sensemaking Processes</b>		
	<b>Locating</b>	<b>Meaning-making</b>	<b>Becoming</b>
<b>Defying the Odds</b>	Locating the leader in situations of immense difficulty	Stories focus on the leader's strength, courage and fortitude	Stories express the emergence of a hero, a person that can be seen as exceptional
<b>Staying the Course</b>	Locating the leader as trusted captain of the ship, resolute and tenacious	Stories focus on the leader's commitment and loyalty to the company and its employees	Stories express the emergence of a leader able to take tough decisions for the future benefit of the company
<b>Succeeding through Talent</b>	Locating the leader as deserving of success, having succeeded through merit	Stories focus on a leader who is able, and in whom employees can believe	Stories express emergence of skilful, self-made leader who will continue to deliver success
<b>Giving Back to Society</b>	Locating the leader as having accumulated material success and reputation	Stories focus on the leader's duty and compassion, transcending the accrual of financial reward	Stories express the emergence of a more complete human being who shares success with others

**Mairi Maclean** is Professor of International Management and Organization Studies at the University of Exeter Business School. She is head of the Organization Behaviour and Human Resource Management subject group in the Department of Management. Her research interests include international business elites, comparative organization studies, business history and corporate governance. Her books include *Business Elites and Corporate Governance in France and the UK* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), written with Charles Harvey and Jon Press, and funded by the Leverhulme Trust and Reed Charity. She is the author of four books, and editor of a further four. Recent publications include contributions to *Organization Studies*, *Human Relations*, *Business History*, *Business History Review* and the *Sociological Review*. [Email: [k.m.maclean@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:k.m.maclean@exeter.ac.uk)]

**Charles Harvey** is Professor of Business History and Management and Pro-Vice-Chancellor for the Humanities and Social Sciences at Newcastle University. He is author of numerous books and articles in the fields of strategy, management and business history. He is co-author, with Sydney Finkelstein and Thomas Lawton of *Breakout Strategy* (McGraw-Hill, 2007). In 2006 he published, with Mairi Maclean and Jon Press, *Business Elites and Corporate Governance in France and the UK* (Palgrave Macmillan). Recent publications include contributions to the *Journal of Management Studies*, *Human Relations*, *Organization Studies*, *Business History* and the *Economic History Review*. [Email: [Charles.Harvey@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Charles.Harvey@ncl.ac.uk)]

**Robert Chia** is Professor of Management at Strathclyde University Business School. He holds a PhD in Organization Studies from Lancaster University, and publishes regularly in the leading international journals including *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Long Range Planning*, and *Journal of Management Inquiry*. Prior to entering academia 23 years ago, he worked for 16 years in Aircraft Engineering, Manufacturing Management and HRM. His abiding research interest has been on the enhancement of life chances through the systematic analysis of the guiding principles underlying wealth creation. His latest books include *Strategy without Design* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and *Research in the Sociology of Organizations: Philosophy and Organization Theory* (Emerald Books, 2011). [Email: [Robert.Chia@gsb.strath.ac.uk](mailto:Robert.Chia@gsb.strath.ac.uk)]

#### **Contact details for each author**

##### **Mairi Maclean**

University of Exeter Business School, Streatham Court, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4PU, UK. Email: [k.m.maclean@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:k.m.maclean@exeter.ac.uk)

##### **Charles Harvey**

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Newcastle University, 7<sup>th</sup> Floor, Daysh Building, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, UK. Email: [Charles.Harvey@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Charles.Harvey@ncl.ac.uk)

##### **Robert Chia**

Strathclyde Business School, Department of Management, 199 Cathedral Street, Glasgow, G4 0QU, UK. Email: [Robert.Chia@gsb.strath.ac.uk](mailto:Robert.Chia@gsb.strath.ac.uk)